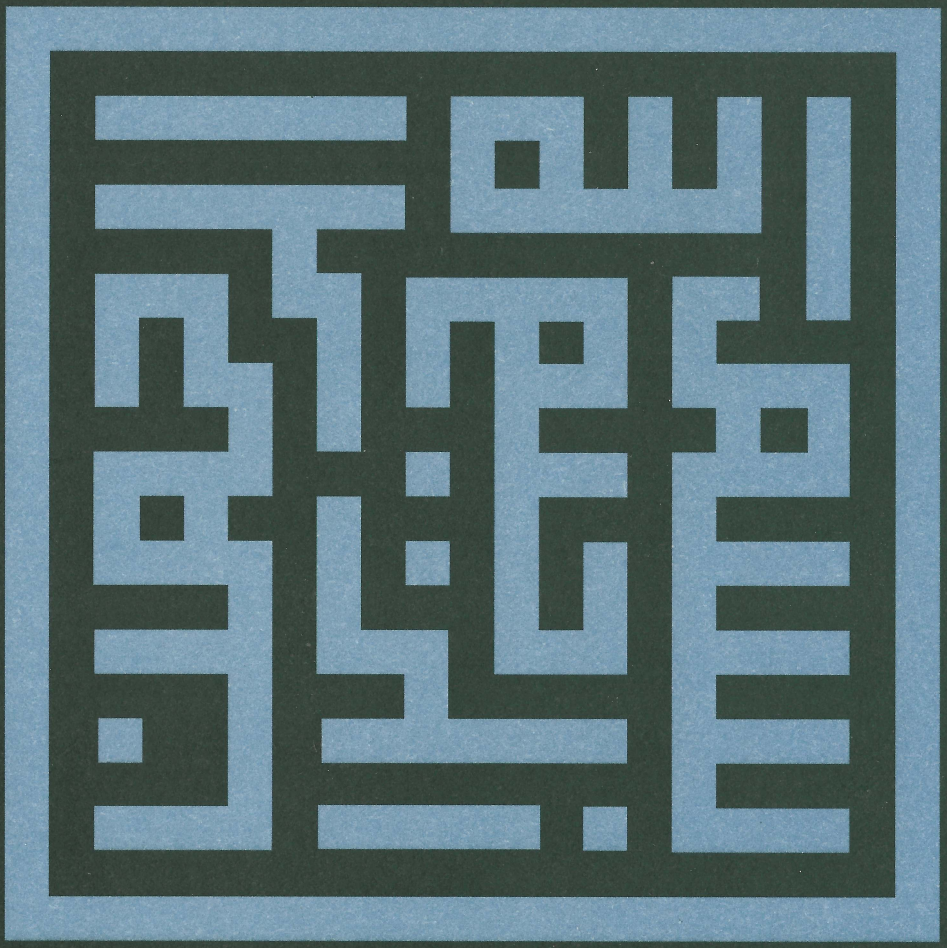
THE CONCEPT OF BIDʿA IN THE ISLAMIC SHARIʿA

Nuh Ha Mim Keller



THE M.A.T. PAPERS

THE CONCEPT OF BIDᶜA IN THE ISLAMIC SHARIᶜA

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The Concept of *Bidᶜa* in the Islamic *Sharīᶜa*

THERE ARE FEW topics that generate as much controversy today in Islam as what is *sunna* and what is *bidᶜa*, or 'reprehensible innovation,' perhaps because of the times Muslims now live in and the challenges they face. Without a doubt, one of the greatest events to impact upon Muslims in the last thousand years has been the end of the Islamic caliphate earlier in this century, an event that marked not only the passing of temporal, political authority, but in many respects the passing of the consensus of orthodox Sunnī Islam as well. No-one familiar with the classical literature in any of the Islamic legal sciences, whether Koranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), hadith, or jurisprudence (*fiqh*), can fail to be struck by the fact that questions are asked today about basic fundamentals of Islamic Sacred Law (*Sharīᶜa*) and its ancillary disciplines that would not have been asked in the Islamic period—not because Islamic scholars were not brilliant enough to produce the questions, but because they already knew the answers.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify some possible misunderstandings of the concept of 'innovation' (*bidᶜa*) in Islam, in the light of the Prophetic hadith:

'[...] Beware of matters newly begun, for every matter newly begun is innovation, every innovation is misguidance, and every misguidance is in hell.'

The materials I use are the traditional Islamic sources, and my discussion will centre on three points.

The first point is that scholars note that the above hadith does not refer to all new things without restriction, but only to those to whose validity nothing in Sacred Law attests. The use of the word *every* in the hadith does not indicate an absolute generalization, for there are many examples of similar generalizations in the Koran and *sunna* that are not applicable without restriction, but rather are qualified by restrictions found in other primary textual evidence.

The second point is that the *sunna* and way of the Prophet ﷺ was to accept new

acts initiated in Islam that were of the good and did not conflict with established principles of Sacred Law, and to reject things that were otherwise.

And our third and last point is that new matters in Islam may not be rejected merely because they did not exist in the first century, but must be evaluated and judged according to the comprehensive methodology of Sacred Law, by virtue of which it is and remains the final and universal moral code for all peoples until the end of time.

Our first point, that the hadith does not refer to all new things without restriction, but only to those which nothing in Sacred Law attests to the validity of, may at first seem strange, in view of the wording of the hadith, which says, '*every* matter newly begun is innovation, *every* innovation is misguidance, and *every* misguidance is in hell.' Now the word *bidʿa* or 'innovation' linguistically means *anything* new. So our first question must be about the generalizability of the word *every* (*kull*) in the hadith: does it literally mean that everything new in the world is *ḥarām* or 'unlawful'? The answer is no. Why?

In answer to this question, we may note that there are many similar generalities in the Koran and *sunna*, all of them admitting of some qualification, such as the word of Allah Most High in Sūrat al-Najm: 'A man can have nothing, except what he strives for' (53:39), despite there being an overwhelming amount of evidence that a Muslim benefits from the spiritual works of others, for example, from his fellow Muslims, the prayers of angels for him, the funeral prayer over him, charity given by others in his name, and the supplications of believers for him.

Consider, also, the words of Allah to unbelievers in Sūrat al-Anbiyā', 'Verily you and what you worship apart from Allah are the fuel of hell' (21:98). Here, 'what you worship' is a general expression, although there is no doubt that Jesus, his mother, and the angels were all worshipped apart from Allah, but are not the fuel of hell, so are not what is meant by the verse.

Another example is the word of Allah Most High in Sūrat al-Anʿām about past nations who paid no heed to the warners who were sent to them: 'But when they forgot what they had been reminded of, We opened unto them the doors of everything' (6:44), even though the doors of mercy were not opened unto them.

And again, there is the hadith related by Muslim that the Prophet ﷺ said, 'No one who prays before sunrise and before sunset will enter hell,' which is a generalised expression that definitely does not mean what its outward generality implies, for someone who prays the dawn and midafternoon prayers and neglects all other prayers and obligatory works is certainly not meant. It is rather a

generalization whose intended referent is particular, or a generalization that is qualified by other texts, for when there are fully authenticated hadiths, it is obligatory to reach an accord between them, because they are in reality as a single hadith, the statements that appear without further qualification being qualified by those that furnish the qualification, in order that the combined implications of *all* of them may be utilized.

Let us look for a moment at *bidᶜa* or innovation in the light of the *sunna* of the Prophet ﷺ concerning new matters. *Sunna* and *innovation* (*bidᶜa*) are two opposed terms in the language of the Lawgiver, such that neither can be defined without reference to the other. That is, they are opposites, and 'things are made clear by their opposites.' Many writers have sought to define innovation (*bidᶜa*) without defining the *sunna*, and have thus fallen into hopeless difficulties and conflicts with the primary textual evidence that contradicts their definition of innovation. If they had first defined the *sunna*, they would have produced a criterion free of shortcomings.

Sunna, in both the language of the Arabs and the Sacred Law, means *way*, as is illustrated by the words of the Prophet ﷺ, 'He who inaugurates a good *sunna* in Islam [...] And he who introduces a bad *sunna* in Islam [...],' *sunna* meaning way or custom. The *way* of the Prophet ﷺ in giving guidance, accepting, and rejecting: this is the *sunna*. For 'good *sunna*' and 'bad *sunna*' mean a good way or bad way, and cannot possibly mean anything else. Thus, the meaning of *sunna* is not what most students, let alone ordinary people, understand; namely, that it is the prophetic *hadith*, as when *sunna* is contrasted with *Kitāb*, i.e. Koran, in distinguishing textual sources, or the opposite of the obligatory (as when *sunna*, i.e. recommended, is contrasted with *obligatory* in legal contexts), since the former is a technical usage coined by hadith scholars, while the latter is a technical usage coined by legal scholars and specialists in fundamentals of jurisprudence. Both of these are usages of later origin that are not what is meant by *sunna* here. Rather, the *sunna* of the Prophet ﷺ is his way of acting, ordering, accepting, and rejecting, and the way of his Rightly Guided Caliphs who followed his way of acting, ordering, accepting, and rejecting. So practices that are newly begun must be examined in the light of the *sunna* of the Prophet ﷺ and his way and path in acceptance or rejection.

Now, there are a great number of hadiths, most of them in the rigorously authenticated (*ṣaḥīḥ*) collections, showing that many of the prophetic Companions initiated new acts, forms of invocation (*dhikr*), supplications (*duᶜā'*),

and so on, that the Prophet ﷺ had never previously done or ordered to be done. Rather, the Companions did them because of their inference and conviction that such acts were of the good that Islam and the Prophet of Islam came with and in general terms urged the like of be done, in accordance with the word of Allah Most High in Sūrat al-Ḥajj, 'And do the good, that haply you may succeed' (22:77), and the hadith of the Prophet ﷺ, 'He who inaugurates a good *sunna* in Islam earns the reward of it and the reward of all who perform it after him without diminishing their own rewards in the slightest.'

Though the original context of the hadith was giving charity, the interpretative principle established by the scholarly consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of specialists in fundamentals of Sacred Law is that the point of primary texts lies in the *generality of their lexical significance*, not the *specificity of their historical context*, without this implying that just anyone may make provisions in the Sacred Law, for Islam is defined by principles and criteria, such that whatever one initiates as a *sunna* must be subject to its rules, strictures, and primary textual evidence.

From this investigative point of departure, one may observe that many of the prophetic Companions performed various acts through their own personal reasoning (*ijtihād*), and that the *sunna* and way of the Prophet ﷺ was both to accept those that were acts of worship and good deeds conformable with what the Sacred Law had established and not in conflict with it; and to reject those which were otherwise. This was his *sunna* and way, upon which his caliphal successors and Companions proceeded, and from which Islamic scholars (may Allah be well pleased with them) have established the rule that any new matter must be judged according to the principles and primary texts of Sacred Law: whatever is attested to by the law as being good is acknowledged as good, and whatever is attested to by the law as being a contravention and bad is rejected as a blameworthy innovation (*bidʿa*). They sometimes term the former a *good innovation* (*bidʿa ḥasana*) in view of it lexically being termed an *innovation*, but legally speaking it is not really an innovation but rather an *inferable sunna*, as long as the primary texts of the Sacred Law attest to its being acceptable.

We now turn to the primary textual evidence previously alluded to concerning the acts of the Companions and how the Prophet ﷺ responded to them:

(1) Bukhārī and Muslim relate from Abu Hurayra رضي الله عنه that at the dawn prayer the Prophet ﷺ said to Bilāl, 'Bilāl, tell me which of your acts in Islam you are most hopeful about, for I have heard the footfall of your sandals in paradise.' He replied, 'I have done nothing I am more hopeful about than the fact that I do not

perform ablution at any time of the night or day without praying with that ablution whatever has been destined for me to pray.'

Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī says in *Fatḥ al-Bārī* that 'the hadith shows it is permissible to use personal reasoning (*ijtihād*) in choosing times for acts of worship, for Bilāl reached the conclusions he mentioned by his own inference, and the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) confirmed him therein.' Similar to this is the hadith in Bukhārī about Khubayb, who had asked to pray two *rakʿas* before being executed by idolators in Mecca, and was hence the first to establish the *sunna* of two *rakʿas* for those who are steadfast in going to their death. These hadiths are explicit evidence that Bilāl and Khubayb used their own personal reasoning (*ijtihād*) in choosing the times of acts of worship, without any previous command or precedent from the Prophet ﷺ other than the general demand to perform the prayer.

(2) Bukhārī and Muslim relate that Rifāʿa ibn Rāfiʿ said, 'When we were praying behind the Prophet ﷺ and he raised his head from bowing and said, "Allah hears whoever praises Him," a man behind him said, "Our Lord, Yours is the praise, abundantly, wholesomely, and blessedly." When he rose to leave, the Prophet ﷺ asked who said it, and when the man replied that it was he, the Prophet ﷺ said, "I saw thirty-odd angels each striving to be the one to write it."'

Ibn Ḥajar comments in *Fatḥ al-Bārī* that the hadith 'indicates the permissibility of initiating new expressions of *dhikr* in the prayer other than the ones related through hadith texts, as long as they do not contradict those conveyed by the hadith. It is clear that this is since the above words were a mere enhancement and addendum to the known, *sunna dhikr*.'

(3) Bukhārī relates from ʿĀ'isha رضي الله عنها that the Prophet ﷺ dispatched a man at the head of a military expedition who recited the Koran for his companions at prayer, finishing each recital with al-Ikhlāṣ (Koran 112). When they returned, they mentioned this to the Prophet ﷺ, who told them, 'Ask him why he does this,' and when they asked him, the man replied, 'because it describes the All-Merciful, and I love to recite it.' The Prophet ﷺ said to them, 'Tell him that Allah loves him.'

In spite of this, we do not know of any scholar who holds that doing the above is recommended, for the acts the Prophet ﷺ used to do regularly are superior, though his confirming the like of this illustrates his *sunna* regarding his acceptance of various forms of obedience and acts of worship, and shows he did not consider the like of this to be a reprehensible innovation (*bidʿa*), as do the bigots who vie with each other to be the first to brand acts as innovation and misguidance. Further, it will be noticed that all the preceding hadiths are about the prayer,

which is the most important of bodily acts of worship, and of which the Prophet ﷺ said, 'Pray as you have seen me pray,' despite which he accepted the above examples of personal reasoning because they did not depart from the form defined by the Lawgiver, for every limit must be observed, while there is latitude in everything besides, as long as it is within the general category of being required by Sacred Law. This is the *sunna* of the Prophet and his way ﷺ and could not be more clear. The ulema infer from it that every act for whose benefit there is evidence in Sacred Law and which does not oppose an unequivocal primary text or entail harmful consequences is not included in the category of reprehensible innovation (*bidʿa*), but rather is of the *sunna*, even if there should exist something whose performance is superior to it.

(4) Bukhari relates from Abu Sa'id al-Khudri ﷺ that a band of the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ once departed on one of their journeys, alighting at the encampment of some desert Arabs whom they asked to be their hosts, but who refused to have them as guests. The leader of the encampment was stung by a scorpion, and his followers tried everything to cure him, and when all had failed, one said, 'If you'd approach the group camped near you, one of them might have something.' So they came to them and said, 'O band of men, our leader has been stung and we've tried everything. Do any of you have something for it?' and one of them replied, 'Yes, by Allah, I recite healing words [*ruqya*] over people, but by Allah, we asked you to be our hosts and you refused, so I will not recite anything unless you give us a fee.' They then agreed upon a herd of sheep, so the man went and began spitting and reciting the *Fātiḥa* over the victim until he got up and walked as if he were a camel released from its hobble, there being nothing the matter with him. They paid the agreed fee. Some of the Companions wished to divide this up, but the man who had done the reciting told them, 'Do not do so until we reach the Prophet ﷺ and tell him what has happened, to see what he may order us to do.' They came to the Prophet ﷺ and told him what had occurred, and he said, 'How did you know it was of the words which heal? You were right. Divide up the herd and give me a share.'

The hadith is explicit that the Companion had no previous knowledge that reciting the *Fātiḥa* to heal (*ruqya*) was countenanced by Sacred Law, but rather did so because of his own personal reasoning (*ijtihād*), and since it did not contravene anything that had been legislated, the Prophet ﷺ confirmed him therein. He did so because it was of his *sunna* and way to accept and confirm what brought good and did not entail harm, even if it did not proceed from the acts of the Prophet himself ﷺ as a definitive precedent.

(5) Bukhārī relates from Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī ﷺ that one man heard another reciting al-Ikhlāṣ (Koran 112) over and over again, so when morning came he went to the Prophet ﷺ and sarcastically mentioned it to him. The Prophet ﷺ said, 'By Him in whose hand is my soul, it equals one-third of the Koran!' Dāraquṭnī recorded another version of this hadith in which the man said, 'I have a neighbor who prays at night and does not recite anything but al-Ikhlāṣ.'

The hadith shows that the Prophet ﷺ confirmed the person's restricting himself to this sura while praying at night, despite its not being what the Prophet himself did ﷺ, for though the Prophet's practice of reciting from the whole Koran was superior, the man's act was within the general parameters of the *sunna* and there was, in any case, nothing blameworthy about it.

(6) Aḥmad and Ibn Ḥibbān relate from ʿAbdullāh ibn Burayda that his father said, 'I entered the mosque with the Prophet ﷺ. A man was at prayer, supplicating with the following words: "O Allah, I ask You by the fact that I testify You are Allah, there is no god but You, the One, the Ultimate, who did not beget and was not begotten, and to whom none is equal," and the Prophet ﷺ said, "By Him in whose hand is my soul, he has asked Allah by His greatest name, which if He is asked by it He gives, and if supplicated He answers."'

It is plain that this supplication came spontaneously from the Companion, but since it conformed to the requirements of the Sacred Law, the Prophet ﷺ confirmed it, and indeed approved it strongly, even though it is not known that the Prophet ﷺ had ever taught it to him.[1]

We are now able to return to the hadith with which I began this essay, in which the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, 'Beware of matters newly begun, for every innovation is misguidance.' We should understand it in the orthodox way that has been expounded by a leading classical scholar of Islam, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Jurdānī, whose extended paraphrase and commentary runs as follows:

Beware of matters newly begun

'Distance yourselves and be wary of matters newly innovated that did not previously exist,' i.e. things invented in Islam that contravene the Sacred Law,

for every innovation is misguidance

meaning that 'every innovation is the opposite of the truth', i.e. falsehood, a hadith that has been related elsewhere as:

for every newly begun matter is innovation, every innovation is misguidance, and every misguidance is in hell

meaning that everyone who is misguided, whether through himself or by following another, is in hell; the hadith referring to matters that are not good innovations with a basis in Sacred Law. It has been stated [by al-ʿIzz ibn ʿAbd al-Salām] that innovations (*bidʿa*) fall under the five headings of the Sacred Law [the obligatory (*wājib*), unlawful (*ḥarām*), recommended (*mandūb*), offensive (*makrūh*), and permissible (*mubāḥ*)]:

(1) The first category comprises innovations that are **obligatory**, such as recording the Koran and the laws of Islam in writing when it was feared that something might be lost from them; the study of the disciplines of Arabic that are necessary to understand the Koran and *sunna* such as grammar, the declension of nouns, and lexicography; hadith classification to distinguish between genuine and spurious prophetic traditions; and the philosophical refutations of arguments advanced by the Muʿtazilites and comparable sects.

(2)The second category is that of **unlawful** innovations such as non-Islamic taxes and levies, giving positions of authority in Sacred Law to those unfit for them, and devoting one's time to learning the beliefs of heretical sects that contravene the tenets of faith of Ahl al-Sunna.

(3) The third category consists of **recommended** innovations such as building hostels and schools of Sacred Law, recording the research of Islamic schools of legal thought, writing books on beneficial subjects, extensive research into fundamentals and particular applications of Sacred Law, in-depth studies of Arabic linguistics, the reciting of *wirds* by those with a Sufi path, and commemorating the birth (*mawlid*) of the Prophet Muḥammad (Allah bless him and give him peace) and wearing one's best and rejoicing at that occasion.

(4) The fourth category includes innovations that are **offensive**, such as ornately embellishing mosques, decorating the Koran and having a backup man (*muballigh*) loudly repeat the spoken *Allāhu akbar* of the imam when the latter's voice is already clearly audible to those who are praying behind him.

(5) the fifth category is that of innovations that are **permissible** , such as sifting flour, using spoons and having more enjoyable food, drink and housing.[2]

I will conclude my summary of the classical position on this subject with a translation of the following statement by Shaykh ʿAbdullāh al-Ghumārī:

In his *al-Qawāʿid al-kubrā*, al-ʿIzz ibn 'Abd al-Salām classifies innovations [*bidʿa*], on the basis of their benefit, harm, or indifference, into the five categories of rulings: the obligatory, recommended, unlawful, offensive, and permissible,

giving examples of each and mentioning the principles of Sacred Law that verify his classification. His words on the subject display his keen insight and comprehensive knowledge of both the principles of jurisprudence and the human advantages and disadvantages in view of which the Lawgiver has established the rulings of Sacred Law.

Because his classification of innovation [*bidʿa*] was established on a firm basis in Islamic jurisprudence and legal principles, it was confirmed by Imām al-Nawawī, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, and the vast majority of Islamic scholars, who received his words with acceptance and considered it obligatory to apply them to the new events and contingencies that occur with the changing times and the peoples who live in them. One may not support the denial of his classification by clinging to the hadith 'Every innovation is misguidance,' because the only form of innovation that is without exception misguidance is that which concerns tenets of faith, like the innovations of the Muʿtazilites, Qadarites, Murji'ites, and so on, that contradicted the beliefs of the early Muslims. This is the 'innovation of misguidance' because it is harmful and devoid of benefit. As for innovation in works, meaning the occurrence of an act connected with worship or something else that did not exist in the first century of Islam, it must necessarily be judged according to the five categories mentioned by al-ʿIzz ibn ʿAbd al-Salām. To claim that such innovation is misguidance without further qualification is simply not applicable to it, for new things are among the exigencies brought into being by the passage of time and generations, and nothing that is new lacks a ruling of Allah Most High that is applicable to it, whether explicitly mentioned in primary texts, or inferable from them in some way. The only reason that Islamic law can be valid for every time and place and be the consummate and most perfect of all divine laws is because it comprises general methodological principles and universal criteria, together with the ability its scholars have been endowed with to understand its primary texts, the knowledge of types of analogy and parallelism, and the other excellences that characterize it. Were we to rule that every new act that has come into being after the first century of Islam is an innovation of misguidance without considering whether it entails benefit or harm, then a large share of the fundamental bases of Sacred Law would be invalidated, as well as those rulings established by analogical reasoning [*qiyās*], and this would narrow and limit the Sacred Law's vast and comprehensive scope.[3]

Wa Jazākum Allāhu khayran,
wa'l-ḥamdu li'Llāhi
Rabbi'l-ʿĀlamīn.

Notes

1 Yūsuf al-Rifāʿī, *Adilla Ahl al-Sunna wa'l-Jamāʿa* (Kuweit, 1404/1984), 119-33.

2 Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdallāh al-Jurdānī, *al Jawāhir al-lu'lu'iyya fī sharḥ al-Arbaʿīn al-Nawawiyya* (Cairo, 1328/1910, reprinted Damascus: ʿAbd al-Wakīl al-Durūbī, n.d.), 220-21.

3 al-Rifāʿī, op. cit., 145-47.

THE M.A.T. PAPERS NO.3

THE CONCEPT OF BIDʿA IN THE ISLAMIC SHARIʿA

Nuh Ha Mim Keller

THE PURPOSE of this paper is to clarify some possible misunderstandings of the concept of innovation (bid a) in Islam, in the light of the Prophetic hadith:

> '[...] Beware of matters newly begun, for every matter newly begun is innovation, every innovation is misguidance, and every misguidance is in hell.'

The discussion centres on three points.

The first point is that scholars point out that the above hadith does not refer to all new things without restriction, but only to those to whose validity nothing in Sacred Law attests. The use of the word *every* in the hadith does not indicate a generalization, for there are many examples of similar generalizations in the Koran and sunna that are not applicable without restriction, but rather are qualified by restrictions found in other primary textual evidence.

The second point is that the sunna and the way of the Prophet ﷺ was to accept new acts initiated in Islam that were of the good and did not conflict with established principles of Sacred Law, and to reject things that were otherwise.

And the third and last point is that new matters in Islam may not be rejected merely because they did not exist in the first century, but must be evaluated and judged according to the comprehensive methodology of Sacred Law, by virtue of which it is and remains the final and universal moral code for all people until the end of time.

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